

THE METEORIC ADVENTURES OF COME-ON CHARLEY

By
Thomas Addison

M. PERCIVAL TEETERS, known also to fame as Merciful Skeeters, Come-On Charley's private secretary, was in the billiard room of the Hotel Riehl doing a little practicing at French caroms. As he now made a most round-the-table shot, some one spoke—some one who had come in quietly from the bar and approached the table.

"By Jove, clever!"

The speaker pronounced it "clever," and Mr. Teeters looked at him. He was a young man, possibly thirty-two or three.

"Not so slow," Mr. Teeters acknowledged graciously. "Like to shoot a few?"

The other laughed. "I'm not in your class, really. But I know good billiards when I see 'em. That shot now—the way you've left 'em—how about it? Carom on the red, what?"

Mr. Teeters shook his head indignantly. "White," he said. "Dollar I score."

The young man smiled and laid a paper dollar on the rail. Mr. Teeters covered it with two fingers and then, in the act of drawing back his cue, he paused in open wonder.

With a dexterous twist of the wrist the stranger flipped a monocle on to his silk ribbon into the grasp of finger and thumb and screwed it in his eye. The proceeding was novel to that gentleman's experience, and it fascinated him. He hesitated a fatal second longer and inquired: "And it was a perfectly simple shot?"

"What do you know about that?" he cried. "A one-armed baby could make it lying on his back!"

He threw down his cue in disgust, and stared again at the stranger. The latter, with apparently perceptible lifting of his brow, released the glass and it was now hanging on his waistcoat.

"I'm afraid I put you out," apologized the strange young man. He gathered up the stakes and added: "Pray let me offer you something. I'm a bit seedy this morning—art last night's all that sort of thing—and a peg of Scotch would set me up. I fancy. How about yours?"

He had a way of speaking that was winning, and Mr. Teeters warmed to him despite his loss.

"Thanks. Can't go the heavy wet this time of day, but I don't mind lapping up a dip of scotch."

"Right!" cheerfully acquiesced the other, and held out his hand. "My name is Harry Lynham. He smiled whimsically. 'Viscount Lynham they call me at home. My father is the Earl of Ever-solve.'"

Mr. Teeters took the extended hand and breathed hard.

"My name," he mumbled, "is Teeters—Percival Teeters."

"Teeters?" questioned Lord Harry Lynham eagerly. "Not by any happy chance the friend and companion of Mr. Charles Arthur Carter?"

"I'm it," confessed Mr. Teeters, flattered to find himself in such renown.

"My dear fellow! I say, I'm charmed, you know," exclaimed his lordship. "I've read a lot about you and Mr. Carter. That Brahman's Eye affair. What? Most extraordinary."

"Slack little job," he admitted. "A con man has got to step up to keep ahead of me and Charley. Got to feel pretty swift."

Mr. Teeters expanded his narrow chest and wiggled his mustache under stress of the pleasurable emotions which assailed him.

"Say," he begged, "wait a minute and I'll get Charley. He's just as interesting as I am."

When Mr. Teeters returned with his chief a man was standing at the table talking to Lord Lynham. His attitude was deferential, almost obsequious. Lord Lynham looked plainly bored. Charley checked Mr. Teeters, and they hung back near the door. The conversation reached them nevertheless, and they listened with ears a-prick.

"Sixty thousand dollars, my lord," the man was saying, "would give you a handsome profit on that painting. I happen to know, if you will pardon me, my lord, that you paid only thirty-seven thousand."

The viscount made an impatient movement, and his tone was mocking when he replied:

"Really? I fancied that was a secret and, I've known, I rather think it is in spite of your assurance. No doubt you have private information of the price paid for the Monet, and the others. Eh?"

"My lord," rejoined the other mildly, "I am concerned only with this Corot at present. Judge Hewlett has commissioned me to offer you."

"Oh, confound your Judge Hewlett!" broke in Lynham fretfully. "I tell you, my good fellow—I've stopped short, for he had caught a glimpse, it seemed, of Mr. Teeters and Charley."

"Come right over, gentlemen," he called out, and arose to welcome them.

"I say," said Charley, when his secretary had introduced him, "don't want to butt in. Business first. Pleasure afterward."

"Pray sit down," Lord Lynham entreated him. "It is not business, this affair—it's a ball game. You've come in at the nick of time, my dear chap. He turned to the man, who was tactfully, though respectfully, holding his ground.

"Mr.—ah—"

"Hopkins," supplied that person.

"My good Mr. Hopkins," said his lordship with a slight irony, "you and your six thousand dollars may go to the devil for all of me. This is final, you understand—out of my hands."

"In that case, my lord," returned Mr. Hopkins, suave as ever, "there is nothing left for me to do but go."

And he went.

"That bouncer Hopkins gets on my nerves," complained the viscount, half humorously. "Do either of you, by the way, happen to go in for oil?"

"What kind?" asked Mr. Teeters.

"There's hair oil, olive oil and Standard oil."

He was quite in earnest, and Lord Lynham answered him with equal gravity.

"We're talking at odds, old chap. I mean oil paintings, like that hanging over the bar there."

know, I shipped them home yesterday to Ever-solve Castle."

And thus, in the most natural way in the world, began Mr. Carter's acquaintance with a delightfully democratic nobleman.

Mr. Teeters placed his hand over the telephone transmitter and looked mysteriously. Mr. Carter, peeping out into the sitting-room from his bedroom door, was torn between native modesty and the desire for information; for he was in his birthday suit, having stepped trickling from his bath at the secretary's hail.

"It's a lady, Come-On," proclaimed Mr. Teeters.

Charley's eyes kindled.

"Say! By George!" he whispered with unnecessary caution. "Hold her, Skeeters—"

Charley disappeared, and Mr. Teeters addressed himself to the fair one at the other end of the wire. When Mr. Carter, attired in slippers and bathrobe, came sprinting through the door not thirty seconds later, Mr. Teeters was arising from the telephone. There was an air of suppressed excitement about him.

"It's all over," he announced.

Mr. Carter stared at his secretary.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"Mean?" retorted Mr. Teeters. "Why you and me are going round to Tortoni's tearoom on the Avenue and ask for Miss Vera Kingsley. She wants to talk about a picture to us—an oil. I'll be there."

Mr. Teeters simulated mirth with the engaging expression of a man with the toothache.

"She must have seen us at 1 o'clock—and rang off with me sitting there like a clam frozen in the mud. Externally? What?"

"Gee!" said Charley. "And it's half past twelve!"

He leaped back into his bedroom. Mr. Teeters heard him pulling out drawers and slamming them shut, and giving other indications of a hurried toilet.

The hour was not a fashionable one at Tortoni's, and Mr. Carter and his secretary found the place a desert of empty tables. But a demure little maid in a beaming apron conducted them to a small room off to one side where sat the lady at whose unconventional behest they were come.

She regarded them steadily from a pair of blue-gray eyes.

"This is kind of you," she said simply, and with a grave smile.

"Glad I'm here," responded Charley earnestly, and Mr. Teeters mumbled something intended to express his own delight at finding himself present.

He had, in fact, passed instantly under the spell of the girl's beauty. She was tall and splendidly rounded. Her features were like chiseled marble, and her hair might have been spun from the red gold of Cyprus.

"You are not strangers to me by sight," Miss Kingsley informed them when they were seated. "But may I not pour you some tea, Mr. Carter—and you, Mr. Teeters?"

There was a tiny samovar before her, and the fashionable tools appertaining to it.

"Thanks," said Charley. "Good drink, tea."

"I was warned on it," stated Mr. Teeters, coming out of his trance in a burst of lightsome humor.

Miss Kingsley rewarded him with a low laugh, like the tinkle of silver bells, and busied herself with the cups and saucers.

"It is because you are friends of Lord Lynham," she explained, "that I ventured to request this interview, and I'm sure you will forgive me when I have put my case. I simply want you to help me sell a picture to Viscount Lynham."

"Oh, that's it!" said Charley, and looked at Mr. Teeters.

"It is asking too much," questioned the girl. The laughter died in her eyes, and the shadow of anxiety clouded them.

"What about it, Come-On?" demanded Mr. Teeters. "Can we do it? Harry says he's played his string in this picture game. Shot his wad—broke," he interpreted for Miss Kingsley's benefit.

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed incredulously. "If a general, father as everybody knows, is the richest peer in England!"

"Guess he's picture broke," ventured Charley. "Gone his limit."

"But this is a Titian!" cried Vera Kingsley. "If this statement of itself must sweep aside all objections."

"Ha! A Titian!" echoed Mr. Teeters, frowning wisely.

"Yes, it is my mother's. It is a marvelous example of the master's work. Lord Lynham would surely buy it if he could be induced to see it. But he won't listen to me."

"Too bad," sympathized Charley.

"We need the money—mother and I—desperately," faltered the girl. "I thought that perhaps if I told you just how it was you might arrange for me to see Lord Lynham, if—if you would be so good."

She bent toward Charley with a little supplicating gesture that made a lump rise in his throat. He gulped it down, and jumped up from his chair with an eager air.

"That's the trick," he declared. "Percy, get a cab. Come on, Miss Kingsley! Hotel Spendit. Tackle Harry. Make him take a look."

Miss Kingsley veiled her eyes. There was a light in them she would not have him see.

Lord Lynham fortunately was in, and came down to them in the drawing-room of the Spendit. He greeted Charley and Mr. Teeters with his usual good fellowship, but when Miss Kingsley was presented his manner grew distinctly formal.

"Oh, yes," he remarked in a casual way, "believe me, I've had the honor of receiving several notes from you, Miss Kingsley."

"To which," returned the girl, "I have not had the honor of a reply, Lord Lynham."

"I regret to say that I was not interested," he rejoined.

"But, Harry," interposed Mr. Teeters, "he's got a—What did you say it was?" he asked Miss Kingsley.

The Lady of the Loggia

"Cash!" came from the elder lady like a pistol shot.

"Eh? Oh, by all means, if you insist," returned Lord Lynham, casting an amused glance at Charley.

He drew from an inner pocket a bill-book, and counted out from it ten notes of one hundred dollars each. These he handed over to Mrs. Kingsley.

"I think you'll find the amount correct," he said.

Hardly had he pronounced the words when a knock was given at the door. Miss Kingsley opened it, and Mr. Hopkins entered. With him was an elderly gentleman of a scholarly appearance, gray haired and gray bearded. Lord Lynham raised his monocle and stared at him.

"By Jove—Hendricks!" he cried, and he went up to this person and grasped his hand. "This one man of all others I would wish to see," The Titian, of course! But how did you find it?"

"My lord," put in Mr. Hopkins, turning from Miss Kingsley, with whom he had interchanged a rapid word, "this lady wrote to me some days ago, but the letter miscarried and reached me only this morning. I went to Mr. Hendricks with it. His interest was immediately aroused, and he has come with me to pass on the picture."

"You will recall, my Lord Lynham, that I failed to draw an answer from

"Money talks!" he exclaimed. "Ten thousand dollars for the option till Saturday—three days!"

"Mrs. Kingsley," pleaded the director, "civic pride should dictate a preference for the Art Museum. And I can safely promise you two hundred and fifty thousand dollars for this Titian!"

"Bah!" barked Mr. Hopkins. "Senator Park—you know him; the Soap King—will give three hundred thousand. Here's ten that says so!"

Vera Kingsley's voice rang out imperiously, and the tumult ceased.

"I say, you chaps," spoke up Lord Lynham lazily. "You are making a deuced row, you know, over a dead dog. I happen to hold the option on this painting myself."

A moan escaped Mrs. Kingsley. "We've given it away, Vera!" she whimpered.

"Another bargain!" was his mournful comment. "You are lucky, my lord. But my offer stands—three hundred thousand, cash down. Senator Park returns on Saturday. I will call on you then."

He made a disconsolate bow to the ladies and walked out.

"I'll go home, my lord; hang me if I



"A Titian, hey!" repeated Mr. Ball.

corner near the door. It was the portrait of a woman. It was assuredly very good, if a general, father as everybody knows, is the richest peer in England!"

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don't!" snapped Mr. Hendricks. "My blood will stand behind me. Three hundred thousand dollars for a public institution, don't forget that—for the people!"

"If I decide to sell, I'll let you hear from me, old chap," said his lordship with a smile.

When he had gone Miss Kingsley addressed Lord Lynham with biting sarcasm.

"Well, my lord, are you satisfied with your mare's nest? I had waited with another day the profit you will take would have been ours."

Lord Lynham took Charley and Mr. Teeters by the arm and withdrew into the hall.

"Say, Harry," burst out Mr. Teeters, "I'm dizzy as a nut on a merry-go-round, with all that money talk. Three hundred thousand seeds for a pint of paint on a yard of cotton? Oh, mother dear, fan me!"

Lord Lynham laughed lightly.

"Not joking aside, Charley, here's a chance to make a lot of money; and I can't swing it by Jove! I can only manage seventy-five thousand dollars," he said.

"I was going to cable the pater for the rest, and if I couldn't hear from him in time, get the option extended. But the fact is the fire now with Hopkins and Hendricks nosing in. That girl in there wouldn't give me ten seconds' leeway."

"Not five," said Charley, showing concern.

"Exactly! So, as the matter stands," went on Lynham, "it has occurred to me that perhaps you might like to come in, old chap—half and half—pick a plum with me. What?"

Now, as the reader of these veracious tales well knows, Mr. Carter was traveling largely on his reputation as a millionaire.

Mr. Carter knew this. Accurately stated, his balance was seventy-nine thousand and three hundred and fifty dollars. Yet the thought of raking practically his entire capital in a totally untended field of investment did not, somehow, cause him marked disquiet.

"I get you," he notified Lord Lynham.

ing up the note. Charley meanwhile carefully ran through the little mound of banknotes before him.

"This, I trust, finishes the affair," observed his lordship, peevishly, passing back to Charley the pen and the note. "I'm dashed if you wouldn't think we were buying the Bank of England."

Charley started suddenly.

"What that some one at the door, Percy?" he asked in a voice inordinately loud.

As if in prearranged response, the door was thrown open, and a young man of slight build, but with a bold blue eye, strode in.

"Hello, sport!" he accented Mr. Carter, and slapped him on the back. "Thought I'd drop in and feel your pulse. What are you doing with that bunch of kale-dealing fare? Hey, there, Skeeters, playing caper?"

Mr. Teeters fidgeted in his chair. Lord Lynham focused his glass on the loud young man and stared. Charley made apologies for the intrusion.

"Friend of mine," he said. "Teddy Ball."

He let the introduction rest there, but Mr. Ball was not at all unimpressed by the omission. He bowed with easy grace, and inquired genially:

"What's the game? Cutting a melon?"

"Buying a picture," answered Charley. "A Titian, four hundred years old. In that chair. Have a look."

"Pon my word, Charley, this is going a little far," spoke up Lord Lynham with pronounced irritation. "Would suggest that your friend Teddy until we conclude our business. In short—I must request it."

"Oh, don't mind me," said Mr. Ball pleasantly. "And once I've nowhere to go. So this is the Titian, eh? What's the purse it's hung up for?"

"One hundred and fifty thousand dollars," Mr. Carter informed him. "Dirt cheap."

"One hundred and what?" quizzed Mr. Ball jocosely. "Why say, Charley, I can buy this sort down in Grand street by the dozen at twenty dollars apiece—frame and all—about the same price."

For ten seconds the silence in the room was so acute that one could have heard through it a spider spin his web. Then it was broken by a cackle from Mr. Teeters.

"Turn over, Teddy!" he hooted. "You're talking in your sleep."

But Lord Lynham was not in jesting mood. He arose to his feet, elegant and haughty.

"Who is this beastly bouncer?" he demanded sternly of Mr. Carter. "If he intends his remark as a joke it is ill timed, and I—eh—resent it!"

"He's nobody in particular," replied Charley evenly. "Only Teddy Ball, Sporting editor of the 'Scream.'"

Mrs. Kingsley paled, and her daughter's red lips tightened. Lord Lynham's monocle clattered down, and he read out: "Sporting editor of the 'Scream.'"

"Naturally he knows a Titian when he sees it—naturally!"

"A Titian, is it?" mocked Mr. Ball. "He's a Titian, isn't he? It's around and dashed his fist into the flimsy pine-board backing. It splintered, and he ripped the pieces off until the canvas was revealed."

"A Titian, hey?" repeated Mr. Ball. "Look at this!" He pointed to a purple brand imprinted on the cheap cloth—and he had taken a long chance on finding it on this particular cutter, reading for 'Gainsville Cotton Mills.' He read out: "Huh! Maybe I don't know a Titian when I see it, but I've got a hunch that old guy never bought his coat in Georgia four hundred years ago."

"Gollamighty!" croaked Mr. Teeters, and slumped down in his chair.

"Harry, it's a plant!" shrieked Miss Vera Kingsley, her aquamarine eyes flashing fire.

"Pass that money back!" hissed Lynham, jumping for Mr. Carter.

Charley stepped back. The banknotes were in his pocket, and his coat was buttoned over them.

"Don't make me hit you, Harry," he begged. "I've rather liked you, and I'd hate to muss you up. It was a gamble whether you'd win or lose, my dear young man. You started it. Take your medicine."

Lord Lynham's hand shot back to his hip pocket, but Mr. Carter was a bit ahead of him. He snatched the automatic at his lordship, and remarked airily:

"No use, old top. I'll make a sieve look as solid as a dinner plate compared to the way you'll look if you're hunting trouble."

"And you proceed to shoot!" cried Mr. Carter, who was now on his feet. "It was you who said you'd buy the picture—a hundred even? Sure you did. And you're going to do it. Can't disappoint the ladies. Wait a minute. I'll fix it."

He flattered Lynham's prominence, noting against the wall and indorsed it. "There you are, Mrs. Kingsley," he cried, forcing the paper into the lady's nervous hand. "Payable to your order. Good as gold. You said it was; and it pays for the Titian. I'll send it around to you, Harry. You can mail me your check for the hundred. Any old time. Good-bye—good luck—and regards to Mr. Hendricks."

Charley stepped back into the room with Mr. Ball. Mr. Teeters still sat slumped in his chair like a bag of wet sawdust.

"Come-On, I wouldn't 'a' believed it!" he lamented in a hollow voice.

"They might have got me," Charley grinned. "Close shave."

"Hey?" Mr. Teeters was puzzled.

"They overacted," explained Charley. "That last little scene at the Spendit. Played it just a shade too fine."

Mr. Ball, in the midst of lighting a dark and corpulent cigar, paused.

"Hi! I see," he observed. "Got a peek in behind the curtain and saw the flash. Put you wise?"

"Sure," said Charley.